IMPROVING LISTENING SKILLS BY PODCASTS

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Abstract: Being a receptive skill, listening is often ignored in level EAP (English for academic purpose) classrooms. Even though the prominence remains mostly on writing and speaking, developing listening comprehension is equally significant for EAP learners. One effective way of practicing listening skills is to use podcasts in the classroom. Many research findings imply that podcasts provide flexibility among young learners as well as offer a wide range of content to real-life listening. This paper, therefore, sheds light on the usefulness of using podcasts to develop listening skills in tertiary classrooms in the light of existing literature. The study suggests that podcasts can be an effective means to practice extensive listening skills. However, the teachers need to pay particular attention to choose content and make the overall learning process enjoyable for the learners.
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Listening, as a skill, is often undermined in second or foreign language classrooms, and therefore, remains unnoticed by language teachers (Hedge, 2000, p.227). Even in the ELT literature, listening has been described as 'neglected', 'overlooked', or 'taken for granted' skill (Hedge, 2000, p.227). Even though certain ELT methods put emphasis on listening as the 'primary' skill in the sequence LSRW (for example, the audio-lingual method), the belief that this "skill will be developed automatically through exposure to the other language components is surprising" (Hedge, 2000, p.228). However, considering the role of listening in everyday life and especially in the context of English learned for academic purposes, the importance of listening skills cannot be denied. This is because not only it helps the learners understand class lectures, conferences, and speeches delivered in English; an improved listening skill also helps learners develop their speaking fluency by means of an understanding of more complex grammatical structures received from such input.

The merits of advanced listening skills have been acknowledged by other researchers as well. For example, Trinkle (2008) pointed out that learners develop their listening skills before they even acquire reading skills. While talking about the importance of listening skill in language learning, Hedge (2000) referred to Stephen Krashen's (1982) second language acquisition research into the role of input which accounts for the fact that "input gained from listening can have a key role in language acquisition, so the development of effective strategies for listening becomes important not only for 'oracy' but also for the process of acquiring language" (p.229). Hence, in an EAP classroom, it is very important that language instructors provide maximum opportunities for students to listen to a vast range of contents available to them. Listening is considered to be a passive skill and often assumes the learners to practice it outside the classroom; therefore, the extensive practice of listening skills inside the classroom offers a great number of benefits for the learners. For, no language acquisition process can occur without paying equal attention to both intensive and extensive uses of the skill both inside and outside the classroom.

Podcasts are audio recordings or tapes containing a series of lectures or discussions on a wide range of topics. The term was derived from 'iPod' and 'broadcast'. A podcast is a "digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the internet for downloading to a personal audio payer" (Stevenson and Lindberg, 2011). In other words, it is a digital audio file that is created, shared and heard. Podcasts can also be in the form of videos streamlined online, which are known as vidcasts or, more commonly, vodcasts. Fox (2008) defined podcasts as "audio files uploaded to the internet to be downloaded onto a mobile device such as a cell phone, mp3 player--such as iPod--or else simply to be listened to directly from the computer" (p.2).

At the initial stage, the purpose of podcasts was not educational; rather it came as a replacement for 'iTunes' or 'iPods' to listen to music or watch videos at any time. Due to its easy accessibility, it soon caught the attention of language teachers and educators and the podcast technology started gaining attention around 2004 or 2005. It gained popularity not only for the reason that it was easier to access or was motivating for the students, but also for the fact that it brought good monetary and face value for the educators as it was much less expensive to produce and could be accessed at any time anywhere (Rosell-Aguilar, 2015, p.32). Since then podcasts have been used for language learning purposes in various contexts. While the technology seems more appropriate for personal use, in the English language classroom, especially in the ESP context, the benefits of using podcasts are many.

Since ESP (English for Specific Purposes) and EAP (English for Academic Purposes) materials mostly cling to the need-based and easy-to-use contents, podcasts can fit well to the demand of the EAP learners. Despite the fact that there are thousands of audio or video lessons available online, not all of them can be considered as podcasts. Fox (2008. p.2) particularly emphasized that the instance of a subscription is a valuable feature in a podcast because it alerts the listener on receiving a new episode of the lesson which then can be downloaded or be transferred to a mobile device. Apart from video and pictures, podcasts often include a Web location with stored information which gives listeners and podcasters an opportunity to interact with each other through email or a comment section.

Therefore, one of the greatest advantages of using podcasts in an ESP/ EAP class is its accessibility and portability to the users. Minimum technology requirements result in the widespread accessibility and availability of podcasts. Podcasts can be listened to when "commuting, exercising, or even working" (Goldman, 2018, p.2). Therefore, it becomes easier for the teachers to design activities or tasks based on listening materials available on podcasts which learners can complete even outside the classroom; for example, students could be asked to deliver a speech based on their understanding on a certain listening series on podcast which they can prepare at home and later share with the fellow learners.

Besides, the fact that podcasts are authentic materials to use as an extensive listening practice inside the classroom is also supported by researchers in the field. For example, Fox (2008) commented that "podcasts provide a unique repository of authentic oral language materials, an aspect of language teaching which has often been neglected in the past in favor of text-based activities" (p.3). Further, Stanley (2006) also indicated that podcasts render an expanded range of possibilities for extra listening practice both inside and outside the classroom. More advanced learners can be encouraged to listen to authentic podcasts while beginner or intermediate learners can be given some sections of the recordings to listen to (p.2). Stanley's (2006) observation regarding using podcasts in language classrooms seems to comply with Constantine's (2007) explanation.

Constantine (2007, p.1-2) explicates that even learners at the beginner level can get much help out of podcast lessons with a minimum of three to five minutes listening. While it will be an

exposure to a new language for the beginners, it will aid intermediate learners to become acquainted with a variety of voices, thus giving them exposure to the authentic texts. Thus, learners will be able to prepare themselves for the advanced stage of listening. In order to facilitate the process for listeners, Pearson and Fielding (1983) added 'motivation' as a factor to aid them to focus on listening. Since listeners will be exposed to a variety of discourses in the second language, they need to be motivated to engage in listening activities. Podcasts can serve real benefits in this regard because the numerous varieties in the content on podcasts give learners the opportunity to choose audio or video recordings according to their interests and needs.

Moreover, the overall idea of using podcasts in language classroom accords to the theory of 'blended' or 'flipped learning' which accounts for technology-enhanced learning (the concept behind the term was first developed in the 1960s and later appeared in a press release in 1990s). Although it is difficult to say when the term was first used in relation to language learning, Whittaker (2013, p.11) suggested that it coincided with the publication of Sharma and Barrett's book Blended Learning (2007) on corporate training. The main tenets of technology-mediated learning are to pledge for maximum learning opportunities by encouraging and engaging learners taking part simultaneously in face-to-face and online learning process. Sharma (2007) also considered podcasts as practical examples of blended learning as it accounts for the integration of technology and effort of the teacher in the learning process (in Tomlinson and Whittaker, 2013, p.16).

Besides, the use of podcasts is much more feasible for tertiary-level learners because in the age of 'digital natives' (individuals born after the widespread adoption of digital technology) technology is just an integral part of their life and they will be able to easily relate to the materials present to them in the form of audio or video contents. However, this does not mean that students do not need guidance on how to use digital tools for education and learning purposes (Yildirim and Hoffman, p. 118).

Further, the need for using podcasts to develop listening skills can also be traced back to the second language acquisition theories which put primary importance on listening skills. For example, listening was given priority in the earlier language learning methods prevalent in the 1800s such as in the Direct Method and in the Audio-Lingual Method where the language was presented orally in 'drills' even before it was presented in written form. (Hegelson 2003, in Alam & Sinha, 2009, p.20). However, instead of strict drills, for the 21st-century tertiary level learners, podcasts can be much more beneficial with varieties of audio or video lessons. It can aid learners to listen to and understand a diverse range of topics since listening needs to occur as naturally as possible. Learners, thus, should be given an exposure to extensive listening practice to prepare them for real-life use of language.

Much in the same way, the application of podcasts in improving students' listening skills also supports the basis of what Krashen (1982) called the 'input' hypothesis. The Natural approach of second language acquisition largely emphasizes on "exposure, or 'input' as well as a prolonged period of attention to what the learners hear before they try to produce language" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p.179). This idea can be related to the fact that podcasts contain a series of spontaneous conversations or speeches taking place in an actual speaking atmosphere. As the conversations or speeches are spontaneous and are spoken by speakers from various nationalities, it often gives second language learners an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the level of language that is higher than their present level. In other words, it reiterates what Krashen (1982) coined as i+1 in his theory of 'input hypothesis' (p.22).

Fox (2008) further rationalizes the implementation of podcasts in the language classroom by drawing some principles of effective learning. For example, effective learning takes place when

pupils are intrinsically motivated to learn and this occurs when the learning process becomes enjoyable, "the starting point matches their existing expertise" (Vygotsky's, 1962), it reflects their values and concerns, and lastly, they have a degree of control over what they learn (flow), and how they learn (learning styles, flow), against a background of continued dialogue with peers and mentors. This idea of social constructivism or 'connectivism' as coined by Siemens (2006, p.1&2) reflects the purpose of using podcasts in language learning.

Rosell-Aguilar (2015) in her study presented a taxonomy of podcasts to use for language learning and teaching purpose. Her study pointed out the significance of personalized learning and how podcasts account for flexibility both in the case of teaching and learning. Some researchers (Lee & Chan, 2007; McKinney, Dyck, & Luber, 2009; O'Bannon, Lubke, Beard, & Britt, 2011) focused on students' perceptions of using podcasts in language learning. They found that learners enjoy the use of iPods for learning and find it quite attractive and easy-to-use.

Moreover, their study emphasized on the fact that learners used their computers to listen to the academic podcasts they have been assigned instead of transferring those to their mobile phones. Others have investigated the strength of podcasts to develop English proficiency. For example, Rosell-Aguilar (2007) studied the effects of podcasts on students' language skills and their attitudes and perceptions toward podcasts use. They claimed that the "integration of podcasts in learning can improve academic performance, enhance motivation, and promote learning. It also can accelerate in not only listening but also in other language areas such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and speaking" (cited in Ramli, 2018, p.189).

Similarly, Abdulrahman, Basalama, and Widodo (2018) examined the impact of podcasts on EFL learner's listening comprehension. Their study revealed that students were motivated to learn English by using podcasts as it provided authentic materials, interesting listening exercises, and meaningful tasks.

Podcasts as interactive media can play a significant role in developing listening skills among learners. Hence, further investigations of using podcasts in Bangladeshi classrooms will bring out significant insights for future research. The application of podcasts should not be limited to the general tasks of listening to and answering questions. There are other innovative ways of executing podcasts in the ESL/ EFL classroom.

Apart from the readily available podcasts, student-created podcasts along with teacher podcasts can be equally beneficial for the learners to improve their overall listening comprehension skills. Moreover, since evaluating receptive skills is quite challenging, self-evaluation, self-instruction, etc. on the part of the students can bring light to themselves regarding their listening comprehension ability. Further, in accordance with the relevant research into the field, it can be speculated that learners will gain significant benefits from listening to podcasts series as these are authentic texts and will give them exposure to the actual or 'real-life' listening inside the classroom. Also, it will improve their knowledge of the expressions as well as their usages in different contexts. It can be assumed that for Bangladeshi learners, podcasts can be a novel as well as a compelling approach to enhance their oral comprehension skills if the anticipated challenges are mitigated properly. Conclusively, this essay attempted to elicit the prospects of podcasts in the language classroom and examine issues in employing podcasts to teach the listening skill in Bangladeshi tertiary level classrooms.

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